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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003412

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STATE FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/FO:ATACHCO

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: NEA DAS DANIN MEETS WITH SULEIMAN  
FRANJIEH

Classified By: Christopher W. Murray, Charge d'Affaires. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Political leader Suleiman Franjieh told visiting DAS Danin that Israel is the ultimate source of tensions within Lebanon and between Lebanon and the west. Hizballah will disarm if its demands are met, and Christians have joined with Hizballah only to counter a Sunni bid to dominate Lebanon and a wider "Sunni project" in the region. The post-Ramadan period could witness political tension and security problems, but such activities would be against the interests of Christians. While some form of national consensus is needed, Franjieh allowed that an expansion of the cabinet is not necessarily required (in a remark that breaks with other opposition group statements). There is, he suggested, no alternative to dealing with Hizballah, either for Lebanon or for the USG. Finally, Franjieh minimized the threat of Sunni extremism in Tripoli. End Summary.

2. (C) Visiting NEA DAS Robert Danin, Polchief and Polstaff called on ex-MP and former Minister of Health and Interior Suleiman Franjieh, leader of the Marada ("Rebels") party and heir to the political movement and erstwhile militia of his father, Tony Franjieh and grandfather, Suleiman Franjieh, President of Lebanon from 1970-76. Danin conveyed the United States' support for Lebanon and desire to fully implement UNSCR 1701.

ISRAEL IS THE PROBLEM

3. (C) Franjieh expressed his hope that the USG would support democracy in Lebanon and respect the "true will of the Lebanese." "No one wants to be an enemy of the U.S.," he said, though there are differences of opinion on many issues. The real enemy, Franjieh said, is Israel.

4. (C) Nevertheless, said Franjieh, there are many issues between Israel and Lebanon that can be addressed, and even peace is achievable. Instead of treating the symptoms, one should treat the causes of the problem. There is a practical solution to the problems of the Sheba'a Farms and Lebanese prisoners in Israel. A full respect for Lebanese sovereignty is the beginning of a process for peace.

HIZBALLAH DISARMAMENT

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15. (C) On Hizballah, Franjieh noted that Ambassador Feltman had expressed skepticism during a September meeting regarding Hizballah's preparedness to disarm should two conditions (Sheba'a and prisoners) be met. Triumphantlly, Franjieh noted that the very next day Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah issued a statement that his party would disarm if those conditions were met. Franjieh had to admit, though, that Nasrallah had also tied disarmament to a cessation of Israeli incursions into Lebanese airspace, waters and territory and also to the creation of a "strong state" in Lebanon. Still, if all these conditions are met and Hizballah still does not disarm, Franjieh said that his party would adopt a different stance on Hizballah.

16. (C) When DAS Danin asked Franjieh how Hizballah could be disarmed, should the terrorist group choose to impose new conditions, Franjieh responded that any attempt to disarm Hizballah by force would destroy Lebanon. Hizballah has the strength, cover and support of all the Shia, part of the Sunnis, and most of the Christians, Franjieh said. In addition, he claimed that Hizballah is covered and legitimized by the 2005 ministerial statement and 2006 GOL policy statements that give the party free rein to undertake armed "resistance" against Israel. However, should their demands be met they would have no more justification to keep their weapons. In response to Danin's question, Franjieh insisted Hizballah would abide by resolution 1701. It is a dangerous situation, DAS Danin riposted, if Hizballah can bring Lebanon into a war that Lebanon doesn't want. Franjieh repeated that the current government had given Hizballah legitimacy through its policy statements authorizing

BEIRUT 00003412 002 OF 003

Hizballah to do "anything" to achieve the return of the Sheba'a Farms and Lebanese prisoners in Israel.

#### POLITICAL ALLIANCES

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17. (C) On the subject of interconfessional relations, Franjieh said that the problem in Lebanon is that one group or another always tries to dominate the country. At the moment, he alleged, that group is the Sunnis led by Sa'ad Hariri. Whenever one group attempts to assert control, the other two groups combine to resist it -- which is why it is natural, he said, for Shia and Christians to ally against Hariri's party. Franjieh stated that relations between Hizballah and other Christian communities are "excellent."

18. (C) Franjieh speculated on the March 14 coalition's political strategy. He said that the Siniora government would allow March 8 figures to enter the government but at less than a "blocking minority" (i.e., more than one third of the cabinet). This will fail to create consensus in the country, Franjieh said.

19. (C) Meanwhile, Franjieh pointed out, Christians are entitled by the Ta'if Agreement to one half of the Parliament's 64 seats. But 44 of those seats, he alleged, were elected by non-Christians under Lebanon's flawed electoral law. Nevertheless, even with 20 seats in the Parliament, or one-sixth of the seats, Aoun and his allies should get one-sixth of cabinet posts, or at least four.

#### FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

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110. (C) DAS Danin pointed out that the USG supports Lebanon's independence and stability, and criticized Hizballah for building up an independent army in the south and taking Lebanon to war against the will of the Lebanese people and government. Now, following the war, the U.S. is pleased that the LAF has deployed to the south but remains concerned about Damascus' interference in and destabilization of Lebanon.

¶11. (C) Franjieh responded that many countries interfere in Lebanon -- Syria, Iran, Kuwait, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S., for example. As for Iran, Franjieh continued, it is unclear in what way they are interfering; perhaps they are helping Hizballah. As for Syria, its interference in Lebanon is very limited. All phone lines are tapped, he said, and the borders are controlled, which makes it very hard for Syria to have an impact on Lebanese affairs.

¶12. (C) Franjieh continued, "there is a Sunni project and a Shia project for the region. We Christians fear both." If either of them succeeds, the minorities in the region will lose out. Everyone talks about Hizballah's weapons but not about Palestinian weapons. When people talk about disarming the Shia, this worries Christians. However, the talk of a Shia-Christian alliance against the Sunni is false.

¶13. (C) It is Hariri's attempt to dominate the country that is creating problems, Franjieh alleged. Hariri's ambition has pushed (Free Patriotic Leader) Michel Aoun into the opposition. Aoun returned to Lebanon as an ally of March 14. After Rafiq Hariri was killed we tried to get Saad Hariri and Aoun together, but Sa'ad refused, Franjieh complained. It is probably too late to accomplish this, but there must at least be dialogue. We want it, he said, but on a party-to-party basis, not man-to-man.

#### POST-RAMADAN

¶14. (C) Asked about widespread press speculation that the situation in Lebanon would heat up after Ramadan, Franjieh replied that while everyone is making accusations in the media, his Marada Party is against any anti-democratic developments. Any security problem is bad for minorities, and in particular, for Christians.

¶15. (C) Lebanon needs a national consensus. This does not necessarily require a national unity cabinet, but some form of national consensus. (Note: Franjieh repeated his

BEIRUT 00003412 003 OF 003

formulation -- that some mechanism of national consensus is needed, but not necessarily an expanded national unity cabinet. This was a new formulation, and may represent a softening of March 8 group policy, which has insisted on expanding the cabinet, or at least of Marada's interpretation of it. End note.) Franjieh appealed to Danin, expressing his hope that the USG will "support consensus in Lebanon."

#### DEALING WITH HIZBALLAH

¶16. (C) Franjieh alleged that March 14 leaders had cheated Hizballah by inviting it into the government and then kicking it out of the parliamentary majority. Today's tension was one result.

¶17. (C) If the March 8 opposition used democratic means to take power, Franjieh asked, would the USG deal with the new government or treat it the same way it has treated Hamas? Danin pointed out that in a democratic system, groups such as Hizballah cannot exploit the institutions of the state while retaining their independent militias. One basic tenet of statehood is for the state to maintain a monopoly of force and have just one army. Furthermore, Danin pointed out that the USG is prohibited both by policy and by law from dealing with terrorist groups, and noted that Hizballah had killed many Americans.

¶18. (C) Franjieh countered that in the Middle East there is no choice but to deal with groups like Hizballah. The West may come and go but those groups are always present. "Your allies in Lebanon" (by which he meant the March 14 parties) should have supported Hizballah 100 percent during the

fighting with Israel, he added. If Hizballah had lost, no one would call March 14 traitors; if Hizballah won, as it had, he continued, March 14 would be in a stronger position now. As it stands, there remains only mistrust.

#### SUNNI EXTREMISM

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¶19. (C) In response to a question regarding reports of Sunni fundamentalism in nearby Tripoli, Franjieh minimized the phenomenon. The kind people of Tripoli take in all sorts, he said. That they should harbor Sunni extremists is not surprising. Furthermore, any community can fall victim to extremism. Tripoli, being poor and isolated, is particularly susceptible. (Comment: Franjieh's attitude took us by surprise. The skepticism he has typically expressed regarding Sunni intentions suggested that he should be alarmed by the suspected development of Sunni fundamentalism in Tripoli and other parts of Lebanon. Furthermore, other March 8 figures have raised the specter of Sunni extremism as an argument against Sunni domination of the current GOL. Sunni extremism is suspected, however, of being a Syrian project. Perhaps Franjieh's close ties to Damascus explain his lack of concern. End comment.)

¶20. (U) DAS Danin has cleared this message.  
MURRAY